

Newsletter May 2014

In our October 2013 newsletter we discussed divine election through which God chooses out of a depraved humanity those He has predestined to be saved by an act of his own divine will through grace. Divine Election is a fully biblical doctrine as it was clearly set forth by the Apostle Paul in his many epistles, and the early church unquestionably accepted it as many were being miraculously drawn to Christ and converted to Christianity out of egregious paganism. As the temporal church grew within its worldly environs from its early humble beginnings, the egotism of mankind grew to despise this doctrine. Instead it preferred to base redemption upon fallen man's own initiative and achievement. Today, Arminianism is a widespread doctrine based upon this humanistic notion that opposes the biblical doctrine of salvation received totally by God's sovereign grace alone through a divinely received God-given faith alone. This delusive doctrine is being taught throughout a large segment of today's churches and denominations, either directly or indirectly as being biblical. Most churchgoers have no knowledge of its origin; nor can they recognize it by its formal name. This doctrine has become an established axiom rarely if ever questioned because to do so would be considered radically unorthodox in most of today's evangelical churches. Its abandonment in favor of the biblical Pauline doctrine of divine election would be seen as an impediment to a modern evangelical outreach in which it is thought that any man or woman can be persuaded to accept Christ through human reasoning if only they are exposed to the Gospel long enough through repetitious preaching. The professions of faith in Christ thus obtained are not commonly based upon genuine belief coming about through true faith, but merely from a mental acquiescence induced by human peer pressure. True conversion through a spiritual rebirth rarely takes place as these unconverted initiates join the ranks of many other pseudo-Christians — those who merely mimic all the outward motions and rituals of Christians. They assume that their close association with Christians as well as their diligent efforts to conform to proper Christian behavior in the church will be sufficient to gain them redeemed Christian status.

To properly understand the basis underlying the doctrine of Arminianism, we must first begin with the earlier teachings of a man named Pelagius (cf. Book III, page 165) who was a Catholic priest and monk. He was born on or about the year AD 354 and is believed to have been born somewhere in Britain. He was greatly noted for both his extreme piousness and his asceticism, such that he played an important role in shaping early Celtic Christianity. Pelagius was a rugged individualist opposing the Roman Catholic Church of his day on various issues. Having visited Rome, Pelagius abhorred the moral laxity and church aggrandizement that he saw there. Unfortunately, he saw the cause for that corruption as stemming from the Pauline doctrine of divine grace, which he believed undermined the moral law contained in the Ten Commandments. He also detested the biblical doctrine of original sin, which declares that all men are born with Adam's sin nature. To Pelagius, sin was quite personal such that Adam's sin could not have been inherited by his offspring. He also believed in an "inherent goodness" and "free will" of all men (cf. Newsletter September 2013) such that sin does not completely corrupt a man's will leading to a state of utter depravity, but only alters it making godly living much more difficult to achieve.

Pelagius therefore viewed the Christian life as a great moral struggle to overcome the personal sin in ones life. Only through extreme human effort and ascetic living could sin be conquered, and ultimately through that victory, redemption would be gained. This, of course, would be salvation based upon human works, which totally denies the Pauline doctrine that salvation is received as a gift from God by his grace through responsive faith alone (cf. Ep.2:8). Although Pelagius had correctly determined that the source of evil is located in the human will, he erroneously believed that man had the ability to overcome the dictates of an evil will by determined effort. It was his reasoning that if man did not have the ability to overcome sin, God would have to excuse it since man could do nothing about it. Since God does not and cannot forgive sin, it followed that man must have the ability to overcome it. In his opinion, God's grace was demonstrated only in that he gave man the fortitude to overcome his sinful nature. This humanistic notion would of course make substitutional atonement unnecessary.

Augustine (cf. Book III, page 166), a strong opponent of Pelagianism, was born in or about AD 354 in the town of Tascaste in northern Africa. The great theologian of his time, Augustine molded the doctrines

of the church that would soon begin the Middle Ages. The great difficulties he encountered in his early life are recorded in his autobiographical *Confessions* that have an overall theme of the pursuing grace of God. In opposition to Pelagius, Augustine is noted for his doctrine of the depravity of man, which essentially requires the Pauline doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Nevertheless, the primary controversy between Augustine and Pelagius was over the biblical doctrine of original sin — sin inherited from Adam. Pelagius placed his confidence in human ability to attain salvation for himself, while Augustine placed a full emphasis upon mankind's total dependence on God through sovereign grace. Augustine stated that the power of sin is such that it takes hold of our will. As long as we are under sin's power, we cannot motivate our will to be rid of it. Man is still free to choose between alternatives, but sin always motivates our choices. When we are redeemed, the grace of God frees us into a new state of being whereby we are then free to reject sin — although we still often fail to do so because of the weakness of human flesh. Before receiving redemption, we are not even free to make a decision to accept God's grace because we lack the required faith to do so. Therefore, an act of redemption must come before faith that when received enables us to lay hold of God's grace. Grace is predestined by God to be bestowed upon specific men and women and therefore is not resistible or subject to human failure.

Augustine's view as we see was a total rejection of Pelagianism. Although Augustine was officially triumphant in that controversy within the politics of the church of his day, the Augustinian doctrine only received lip service as the church moved into the medieval period. What actually survived was semi-Pelagianism summarized by this statement: "The will does always remain free in man and can either neglect or delight in salvation." Therefore, in semi-Pelagianism, the works of mortal man must be added in some measure to the works of God to complete the redemption of the human soul. Without this added works no one can be saved. It was much later that a man named John Calvin (AD 1509–1564; cf. Book III, page 235) set forth the biblical doctrines that had been abandoned by the Roman church and later restored through the Reformation Movement (cf. Book III, Chapter 18.1). In *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he reiterated exceedingly well the doctrine of God's sovereignty exercised in the choosing of his Elect that had been put forth by the Apostle Paul in his many epistles. So much so, that the doctrine of God's sovereignty in divine election today is often broadly referred to as Calvinism; although, it should more properly be referred to as Paulism inasmuch as it is directly derived from the biblical teachings of the Apostle Paul.

It was in Holland that we first find the doctrine soon to be known as Arminianism raise up to seriously challenge the Pauline doctrine of God's sovereignty in divine election that was expounded so powerfully by John Calvin. Although Mennonites and other reformation splinter groups generally ascribed to an anti-Calvinistic view, it was a man named Jacobus Arminius (AD 1560-1609), a theology professor in Leiden University (cf. Book III, page 244) who brought the conflict to a head in the church. He flatly rejected Calvinism stating that divine grace is resistible, and that the atonement of Christ is attainable by all men. While Calvin believed that man's will was corrupt and in bondage to sin (as did Martin Luther; cf. Newsletter September 2013), Arminius believed that man enjoyed a freedom of will with which he could either oppose or seek God (cf. Ro.3:11). To Arminius, salvation was all a matter of man's efforts in grasping what God had done in Jesus' atoning work, rather than him receiving atonement without effort by God's hand as God specifically willed through divine election.

After Arminius' death in 1609, his followers formulated a statement consisting of five major points regarding Arminius' views that was then formally submitted as a remonstrance against existing reformed doctrines being taught in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. In general, those Arminian views stated that:

- Man is credited with an inborn ability to choose Christ through an exercise of his free will apart from any direct divine intervention
- Salvation is based upon a faith that man has appropriated through his own efforts of thought and is only foreseen by God such that he is chosen based upon that condition

- God's grace is resistible by fallen man such that any of God's deliberate and direct efforts to save must come to naught if a man or woman stubbornly refuses God's open offer
- The atonement of Christ's death is fully applied to every man and woman on earth conditional upon their personal acceptance of it
- There is the possibility of a man or woman falling out of saving grace earlier received, and man's willful faith can vacillate between belief and unbelief throughout his lifetime

These radical views were completely refuted by the widely attended Synod of Dordt, which met in the city of Dordrecht in 1618-19, and written down in what is generally known as the Canon of Dordt. It is from this document that the five points of Calvinism were later constructed by Calvin's followers in defense of the reformed faith against Arminianism. These five opposing points are briefly set forth here in the following summary statements:

- Man is morally depraved and therefore powerless to make any effort of will to save himself, and he does not even have the desire to seek salvation from God
- God unconditionally supplies the gift of faith to whomsoever He wills through divine effort – thus saving them out of a depraved mankind
- The atonement of Christ is limited to those whom God chooses to receive it and cannot be appropriated by the efforts of fallen man working on his own
- God's predetermined efforts to redeem individuals cannot be thwarted by a man's initial propensity to reject it
- The Holy Spirit seals the believer to eternal salvation throughout his lifetime such that he cannot lose the redemptive faith he earlier received

Arminianism today is sometimes referred to as "Semi-Pelagianism," although we should note that a distinction should be made between the two. Pelagius believed that man could earn his salvation through his own works alone. Semi-Pelagianism, simply stated, says that man is only able to contribute a "little" works to his salvation with God supplying the bulk of the effort. Nevertheless, without that "little" contribution by man, God would be rendered powerless to save anyone. This doctrine frustrates the power of God's grace and sees God as being only semi-sovereign — sovereign only outside the matter of election. Arminianism, on the other hand, states only that all men have the innate power to exercise their supposed free will to accept what God has fully accomplished without the need of God's explicit election and intervention in a direct way. It should be realized, however, that Arminianism quite easily degenerates into a form of Pelagianism in practice as increasingly greater emphasis is placed on human effort and ability. As we must see, all forms of Pelagianism as well as Arminianism rests upon the false foundational assumption of man's innate goodness and his supposed free will.

The two opposing doctrines, Arminianism and Calvinism, emerged out of the Reformation Movement with Calvinism forming the basis for Presbyterianism established under John Knox, and Arminianism that is the basic thrust behind John Wesley's Methodism. That is not to say that other groups and denominations did not then and later align themselves with one doctrine or the other; it is impossible to take a neutral position. However, today, some churches vacillate between the two positions fully embracing neither such that much confusion about these two doctrines prevails. We find the teaching of Arminianism deeply embedded in many of our contemporary churches, but it is even more rife in the many forms of the new or "neo-evangelicalism" so prevalent today. (Neo-evangelicalism is discussed in Chapter 19.2 of Book III, page 405). While it is deeply entrenched within Evangelical Christianity, many conservative and reformed churches, whose doctrines are more closely aligned with Scripture, also have an Arminian leaning to be found in individual members of their congregations if not found in their written creeds or outspoken expositions from their pulpits. These are very important theological issues because it is basically a question of God's sovereignty. This assertion may seem strange to those who were taught Arminianism directly or indirectly in various hyper-evangelical church settings. For that reason we plan to discuss each of the five points of conflict more thoroughly in the next three newsletters. © *Arthur J. Smith, May 2014*